

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE FRANK A. LoBIONDO, CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION
ON THE U.S. COAST GUARD LICENSING AND
DOCUMENTATION OF MERCHANT MARINERS - JULY 20, 2006**

Today, we are having an oversight hearing on the U.S. Coast Guard's Merchant Mariner Credentialing Program. This program helps ensure mariners have the experience, training, physical ability, and character to serve on vessels. Since September 11th, the program has another important role – helping our nation to know who is working on our waterways.

The Coast Guard has had the responsibility for the credentialing of merchant mariners for decades. However, the service has recently been given substantially more duties to carry out the program. For example, the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90) introduced a drug testing requirement for applicants, as well as a requirement that applicants submit to a check of the National Driver Register, so that a mariner's driving record could be examined.

After September 11th, additional safety and security screening procedures were put into place. There is now strict enforcement of the regulations concerning verifying the identity and nationality of applicants. Also, the Merchant Mariner Document was replaced with a new card incorporating tamper-resistant and anti-counterfeiting features.

It is apparent the evaluation process for mariner credential applications has become significantly more elaborate and time-consuming for all involved, especially the Coast Guard. The service has experienced a 25 percent increase over the past 10 years in the number of applications received annually. In Fiscal Year 2004, over 84,000 credentials were processed by the Regional Examination Centers, which also had to collect and account for over \$7 million in user fees.

Despite this increased workload, staffing levels have changed little since 1982, except for the addition of some contract employees in recent years.

The lack of an increase in personnel commensurate with the increase in workload is troubling. Mariners and industry rely on the Coast Guard to process mariners' applications quickly, because a mariner is not permitted to work without a valid credential. Any backlog can have a serious effect on hardworking men and women, as well as our economy. Although the program does not have as high of a profile with the public as the service's search and rescue or port security missions, it is nevertheless just as important.

I thank the witnesses for coming this morning, and I look forward to your testimony. I am particularly interested in learning about the current status of the program; how the implementation of the TWIC card will affect the process, and whether it will aggravate current backlogs. I also want to hear about any possible solutions to the problem.

Admiral Bone it is always good see you. Your experiences as Captain of the Port of New York and New Jersey seem to have served you well. Congratulations on you new job. I would note that given the extensive concerns the witnesses on the second panel intend to express today, you clearly have your work cut out for you on this issue. I urge you or a senior member of your staff to stay and listen first hand to that panel. Their concerns are long standing, and have a serious impact on the U.S. maritime industry.